

Chapter 13

Conclusion

And so our study, as far as Paul and his doctrine of salvation is concerned, is concluded. It has necessitated looking at his use of the Old Testament and seeing how he stayed faithful to its thought patterns and expectations. We have seen how he saw himself to be part of the Hebrew tradition of the prophets declaring the will of Yahweh to his people, and going beyond that, to declare the message of Abraham's God to the gentiles. This was something that the prophets did very rarely, and then normally under constraint. In this Paul was extending the inevitable logic that if the Messiah's coming was to bring the nations into the blessings of the covenant, then, as he believed Jesus to be the Messiah, it was essential that the gentiles should be evangelised to fulfil the scriptures.

We have seen that the assumptions that are made in any study effect the outcome of the study. In this we have disagreed with those who have argued that Paul Hellenised the Christian message, so transforming it into something very different from what Jesus had proclaimed. On the evidence that has increasingly won scholarly support, that the NT documents, and Paul's letters no less than others, are Jewish, we have constructed a picture of Paul that has disagreed with the findings of some others who accept their Jewish character. First, We have challenged the idea that many have embraced that Paul was a member of the zealot movement before his conversion to Christ. The foundation of this argument has been that Paul admits to his zeal and that he persecuted the believers for proclaiming a law free gospel, i.e. that the gentiles were accepted by God without circumcision and the need to follow the Jewish dietary laws as well as Sabbath observance. I have pointed out that this was not the reason for Paul's behaviour for the simple reason that the gentile issue did not arise until Peter had accepted the members of Cornelius's household as members of the covenant community and baptised them. Examination of the evidence has led me to conclude that the persecution was not against the Hellenists per se, but the church as a whole, and the reason for the persecution was that they preached a crucified Messiah something no Jew could countenance without being confronted with the resurrection.

Another assumption was examined, namely the growing dependence on Intertestamental Literature to be the key into the mind set of Judaism and by implication of the early church. We saw that while this literature is of considerable value in helping us to identify the major common issues that were within Judaism, that because of the complexity of NT Judaism, the texts were of very limited use for interpreting the NT. The danger was shown of reading meaning into these texts that could not possibly be proved because of knowing neither the theological position of the stable they came from nor having enough samples to construct a theology for the group. It was argued that it is much safer to recognise the unquestionable influence of the OT on the NT and to also appreciate that the NT church had been taught how to read these scriptures in the light of the Christ event. Thus NT exegesis of the OT is quite distinct from any other reading of the many Jewish claims to rightly

understand the OT texts. There is therefore no need to justify a Christian reading by appealing to other readings, for it is more likely to detract from a correct understanding than to facilitate it.

Thus it is wrong to begin with a picture of Paul as a typical nationalist. He expected the conversion of the gentiles, once the Messiah came. This he had learned from his scriptures. His opposition to the church was entirely about the hope of Israel, not about the gentiles and the conditions of their entry. The issue of circumcision was a latter problem and Paul walked right into the centre of it to defend the gentiles from having to submit to the badges of membership of the Old Covenant because the Old Covenant did not save. We have concluded that the whole circumcision issue was probably a political tool for the Jewish sector of the church to regain control of the movement, a policy which if successful would have altered the whole direction of the churches development and its impact on the world.

We have also seen that Paul had a much more corporate view of man. This is in keeping with his Old Testament roots. We have found that the term 'the body of sin' in Romans 6:6 is likely to have referred to humanity outside of Christ, or the kingdom of darkness, rather than the highly individualistic meaning that most commentators have given. We have also found that focusing on this corporate framework of thought allows us to recognise the corporate dimension of argument in 1 Cor 6: 12-20 and to see that the reference to the harlot is probably a term that was used to speak of unredeemed humanity in its relationship to Satan. These two corporate readings alerted us to the fact that Western expositors focus on the letters as documents that are describing the experience of the individual believer whereas basic common sense ought to tell us that because they were written to churches and of necessity communicated to the gathered church, their theology addresses the church's corporate experience of her God. This realisation caused us to seek to read the text of Paul's letters in a more corporate context and to search for better understanding of the grammatical and theological difficulties that had always been recognised but could not be resolved in the individualistic framework.

This corporate perspective helped us to pick up a dimension to Paul's teaching on baptism. We noted the grammatical and theological difficulties that are associated with reading Paul's teaching as though he was expounding the significance of baptismal initiation and discovered that the texts made much better sense to see them modelled on the Exodus event when Israel was baptised unto Moses. Closer examination of the texts in the light of this clearly Pauline model helped us to see that Paul was speaking of the formation of the eschatological community, rather than about individual Christian experience. We came to see the baptism of the Spirit related to his historical saving activity and that it centred on the very death of Jesus, actually occurring in the historic moment of his death.

This corporate reading was to be a factor in the attempts to understand Paul's doctrine of justification. We found that the discussion takes place in the context of Abrahamic covenant and that its immediate focus is not the

individual but the way Yahweh had delivered his people from Satan's bondage and established an eternal covenant with his people. In this reading we have disagreed with those who have argued that justification is about being declared to be in the covenant. It is, in our understanding, about the creation of the covenant. This is not to deny the necessity the work of God's Spirit to bring individuals to repentance and faith and so enter into the blessings of justification when they appropriate for themselves the blessings secured historically in the cross, but it does stress that the doctrine, in Paul's understanding, is corporate.

We also explored the way Paul understood the death of Christ. We found that he interpreted his death, as Jesus himself had done, as the fulfilment of the Passover. In examining Paul from this perspective we found that the Colossian hymn's description of Christ being the firstborn of all creation fitted into the cultic introduction and conclusion of the hymn and explained the repeated Semitisms found in the hymn that had not logical connection with the theme of personified wisdom that has been imposed on the hymn by most modern scholars. We found in exploring the theme of wisdom in Paul that rather than it having ontological roots it was repeatedly used in the context of redemptive history and often in a setting where the prophets were quoted from texts that referred to Yahweh showing his wisdom in redeeming Israel from her bondage. In this we have unearthed a confused methodology that has led to the misreading of Paul in a crucial area. Once this Paschal setting for Paul's Christology has been appreciated we can see that as the one who redeems creation through his death that the theological thought of the early church, derived from the OT, that only the creator can redeem creation, strongly implies that the redeemer has died on the cross. In the light of this understanding it becomes clear why Paul has used the language of Col 1:16, he is setting out the credentials of Christ being the redeemer of creation, it is because he is its creator. This in turn leads us into a Biblical Trinitarianism that is not the result of philosophical speculation but the result of Salvation history.

This Paschal perspective was found to explain the rest of Paul's statements concerning the death of Jesus, not least Rom 3:21-25 which we saw was loaded with signals that directed us to the Passover. The same Paschal pattern was found to be throughout the NT and so we established that there was both atonement/propitiation in the original and eschatological Passovers and that this understanding was shared by all of the NT writers who wrote on the subject of the death of Christ and its significance for soteriology.

The conclusion of this study is that two major lenses have been missing from virtually all NT exegesis that has had a detrimental effect on properly appreciating the message of Paul. The first is the lens of the Passover, and the second is the lens of a corporate reading of the texts. These two factors bring a far more coherent understanding to the teaching of the apostle in the areas of Christology, Salvation and anthropology.

Clearly a corporate reading of the NT raises many questions not discussed in this volume. It is the authors hope that the next volume of *Contours*, 'Paul Law and Spirit' will answer some of them.